An Analysis of the Mixed Martial Arts Discourse

Community: Language of the Fittest

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ABSTRACT: Mixed martial artists are often viewed in a negative light and are thus overlooked in many ways. Prejudices and preconceived notions are very difficult to set aside; behavior is partially genetically based, but the environment does have an influence to some degree. Regardless, most people find it very difficult to change their behavior because of the uncomfortable nature it induces. For those who do have an open mind, the gauntlet has been thrown down- go behind the scenes and learn what mixed martial arts truly represents. Underlying the crescendo of the sport in which two people are pitted against one another in a fight within a 750 square foot octagon, there is much to be discovered: strategies being formulated, techniques honed, relationships strengthened, mental boundaries tested, much self-reflection, and so many more fine intricacies that truly make the sport a thinking man’s or woman’s game. Of course, without language, a fight would just be a fight, and nothing more.

KEYWORDS: *mixed, martial, arts, discipline, striking, grappling, fight, fighting, sport*

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So you want to be an ultimate fighter? This question is often posed by Mike Goldberg, color commentator for the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), during a live televised fight. Specifically, the question is directed toward the audience when one fighter is getting the crap kicked out of them. It goes without saying that this question reiterates the inherent danger involved in mixed martial arts, but it does nothing to explain why that person on the wrong side of a vicious beating may decide to fight again. For many, it simply indicates the need to refine and improve their skills; more hard work then, is required in many facets of mixed martial arts. Contrary to popular belief, this improvement is not solely limited to living a clean lifestyle, aerobic workouts, resistance training, and sparring. Fighters, amateur and professional alike, undoubtedly also spend considerable time to master their lexis, learn through relevant genres, and set personal goals along the way.

Per Branick (2014), lexis is “a set of terms that is unique to the community” (p. 266). Terminology is indicative of words that have been stipulated with one or more definitions; how a given community perceives these definitions is what gives the words meaning. In regard to the mixed martial arts community, virtually of their lexis actually comes from existing unique terminology that has already been established from various subset communities. Keep in mind that mixed martial arts involves multiple wrestling and fighting styles. There are many wrestling styles involved in mixed martial arts, but perhaps the two most commonly employed in a fight situation are freestyle and Greco-Roman. Wrestling is used to compliment many fighting styles, including boxing, kickboxing, muay thai, karate, jiu-jitsu, judo, sambo, and more.

While there are fighters who only specialize in one discipline of mixed martial arts, they are few and far between as far as professional fighters are concerned; at that high of a level, the risk of underestimating an opponent and the strengths they bring to the table is too great. The more lexis within the mixed martial arts community a fighter has learned, the better prepared they will be in a fight– especially in disadvantageous situations where they find themselves to be on the defense. Additionally, it’s not enough to enter into the world of mixed martial arts with a certain specialty and expect to know the lexis of their own specialty. This is ultimately what makes mixed martial arts so very unique as a discourse community; some terms may be identified with different names. Take the overhook for example, which is a technique that’s used in both wrestling and judo:

“Also commonly referred to as a 'whizzer', an overhook is performed in a clinch or tie-up situation by taking an opponent's arm and burying the hand in their chest or ribcage, and then moving so that both torsos are facing the same relative direction” (Overhook).

This does not mean the fighter has to learn all of this mixed martial arts lexis on his or her own, but rather, from a head trainer, strength and conditioning coach, specialty instructors, and possibly a nutritionist. While the head trainer may not necessarily possess the knowledge for all applicable terminology or be a fighting expert per se, they should be able to direct the fighter in the right direction. Since every fighter is different, the head trainer must be able to assess his or her strengths and weaknesses, and subsequently offer suggestions regarding training prioritization. This may sound like the head trainer’s job is easy in principle– and it would be if they were responsible for only one fighter– but a full gym with simultaneous occurrences would suggest otherwise.

For this very reason, all of these interrelationships are dynamically integrated and ever changing, which is why the use of genres is needed. According to Branick (2014), genres are “a text that helps facilitate communication between people” (p. 267). Perhaps the most important genre for a mixed martial arts gym is a liability waiver that new members must sign, which protects against any potential lawsuits in the case of an accidental injury. Many mixed martial arts gyms have a preset schedule with certain training days and times that fighters can access at their convenience. During training, certain materials, such as a dry erase board or a notebook, may be utilized to organize the logical sequence of events, training partner groupings, objectives, and more for a particular session. Outside of the gym, a fighter’s strength and conditioning coach and nutritionist (if they have one) may communicate with their fighter over cell phone, e-mail, social media, or by other means to ensure the fighter is keeping on track.

Garcia and Malcolm (2010) further elaborate on this form of MMA genre:

“in MMA texts fighters regularly talk about their ‘game plans’ and their

‘strategy’… Because the potential range of techniques which each fighter must

face in MMA is greater than for fights in non-hybrid combat forms, their degree

of calculation and planning is quite marked” (p. 49)

Every fighter approaches each training session with a specific purpose, but even more so, what they hope to accomplish over a longer period of time through goals. Yes, believe it or not, fighters can set goals too, other than just punching someone in the face as they possibly can. Not every fighter trains in mixed martial arts to actually step into the cage and fight against an opponent, so their goal could be just to increase their fitness level. Training consistently at a legitimate mixed martial arts gym will definitely accomplish this; I can attest to this because I have personally participated in a free introductory workout at a mixed martial arts gym called Gladiator MMA, located in Brighton, Michigan.

Hardest workout of my life, and it took me a full 2 weeks to recover. A non-stop body weight metabolic circuit encapsulated the first hour of the workout, in which as many repetitions as possible were performed for 60 seconds, followed by a 60 second rest break. If that wasn’t enough, the second hour of the workout involved non-stop sparring in boxing and grappling, which is a combination of wrestling and submissions. I had never been so happy to drink water in my entire life until I went through that workout. Obviously, goals for fighters who actually train to fight someone else are much different. The goals that they can set for themselves could be to refine technique in their standup (any martial art that delivers strikes from a standing position) or grappling, to learn in detail about their opponent, maintain a constant body weight, and more. In my opinion, the submissions portion of grappling is the most complex discipline within mixed martial arts. The most widely used form of submission fighting is Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, which can be analogously described as a chess match with bodies:

Spencer (2013) describes Brazilian Jiu Jitsu as “primarily a ground fighting style

that focuses on arm and leg submissions, sweeps (flipping over an opponent into a

disadvantageous position), chokes, and defending oneself while on one’s back”

(p. 236)

There are many characteristics of a good fighter; the most important being one that may surprise you: intelligence. This quality allows a fighter to process information quickly and efficiently, cycle through progressions to make the best decision possible, have a large capacity for memory, and understand emotions well. Emotional intelligence is a subcomponent of intelligence that entails being able to assess the emotions of another person while keeping their own emotions in check, unless a situation is warranted where displaying excessive emotion is appropriate. Other important characteristics include a good education, maturity, mental flexibility, confidence, open-mindedness, observational skills, good technique, motivation, conditioning, unpredictability, physical strength, and a high ratio of fast-twitch muscle fibers.

These characteristics are subjectively listed in sequential order from what I would consider to be the most important to the least important; mixed martial arts is not the same as street fighting, and thus requires a lot of self-discipline. This may sound like an oxymoron, but not all fighters adhere to this notion 100% of the time; humans are fallacious and mistakes are bound to occur sooner or later. It is just unfortunate when the media captures it and portrays it in a selectively biased way by omitting relevant information from the public eye, which prevents the public from making better informed decisions. Also, mixed martial arts is a business, so some fighters are intelligent enough to recognize that they represent their own brand, for better or for worse. In other words, that “street thug” could be well educated and spoken behind closed doors.

Once a fighter has developed a large amount of the mixed martial arts lexis and their associated meanings, especially in regard to technique and execution, the fighter should have a solid skillset base. If the fighter desires to fight professionally, unless they are already famous, they will have to partake in a few amateur fights. Much of the success of the fighter depends on whether or not they chose their mixed martial arts gym(s) correctly. A good gym will contain a competent head trainer and credible specialty instructors that understand the importance of a training camp preceding any fight, whether it is their first or 40th fight. Spencer (2013) emphasizes that “fighters must learn to listen to the instructions of their coaches and act accordingly without thinking what they are doing” (p. 242). Without trust, the fighter is doomed before he or she even begins. Typically, a training camp is 12 weeks long, and is more about refining technique, analyzing the opponent’s strengths and weaknesses, and formulating a game plan for that specific opponent.

We as humans learn through repetition, and so it is for refining a fighter’s technique during a training camp, which is done basically by pure volume. Nothing fancy at this point by any means, but scientifically, muscle memory improves from constantly drilling the various movements so they can occur as second nature during a fight. Any noticeable flaw is quickly suppressed and corrected by an experienced instructor. Flaws that an opponent commits are analyzed by observing video tape on them; if no such tape exists, which is largely possible especially at the amateur level where fighters are just starting out, then as much scouting on the opponent must be done as possible. According to Spencer (2013), “strategies are predicated on the tendencies of fighters- their techniques, rhythms, and movements- where fighters attempt to act and capitalize on these tendencies” (p. 239). Scouting report or no scouting report, a game plan is definitely formulated to give a fighter the best chance to succeed. During the last week of training camp, a fighter seeks to “peak”, or reach their optimal cardiovascular and fitness level.

There is one last mandatory procedure that takes place one day prior to the actual fight: the weigh-ins. Weigh-ins aid in fairness because without them, any two people could fight each other despite the vast discrepancies in size. Each fight is categorized based on 7 weight classes: heavyweight (206-265 lbs), light heavyweight (186-205 lbs), middleweight (171-185 lbs), welterweight (156-170 lbs), lightweight (146-155 lbs), featherweight (136-145 lbs), and bantamweight (maximum 135 lbs). Although there is an upper limit for each weight class, most athletic commissions give the fighter an extra pound because of the uncertainty in the scale accuracy. Also, most fighters choose to “cut” about 10-20 pounds before weighing in. As noted by Jetton et. al (2013), “The MMA fighters undergo significant dehydration and fluctuations in body mass (4.4% avg.) in the 24-hour period before competition” (p. 1322).

Fighters need to perform at a high level on the day of the fight, so the weigh ins occur on the day prior to the fight to allow fighters replenish their lost water and get healthy again by rehydrating. This in theory gives the fighter an advantage in size, though both fighters will most likely employ this strategy. Finally, fighters are required to meet face to face for a few seconds, which is an event in and of itself. Matt Hughes, a successful UFC veteran well renowned for getting under his opponents’ skin, believes that fighting is 50% mental. Remember that confidence is a high-ranking attribute of a good fighter, so it makes sense that a fighter’s confidence could be shattered if he or she is intimidated by the other fighter. Fighters often will nonverbally communicate by nodding their heads, opening their eyes really wide, lowering their eyebrows, gritting their jaws, moving side to side, and breathing very heavily. Some fighters will raise their fists close to the other fighter’s face and even engage in verbal taunting. Occasionally, a fighter may choose to shove another fighter.

Undoubtedly, each fight marks the culmination of a fighter’s amateur or professional career. If you think about it, everything in a fight is honest. Even if two fighters are friends outside of the cage, both know exactly what to expect from the other, and will return fire without hesitation. Although I have not personally fought another person inside of the cage, many actual fighters claim that they simultaneously experience excitement, anxiety, and fear. Hell, I experience those emotions when I’m merely watching one of my favorite fighters during a live, televised broadcast with a stacked card (many exciting individual fights). Fighters should be anxious prior to a fight because it demonstrates that they understand the immense risk of injury and possibly their job security- it only takes one loss for a fighter to be cut from an organization.

Once that cage door locks, the time to run home to mommy has passed. Each fighter will spend these initial moments in their own distinct way. While most will bounce around and throw a few half speed strikes to warmup their bodies and stay loose, sometimes a fighter will choose to pace slowly back and forth and not make eye contact with anyone, or perhaps stand stationary with their eyes closed with their back against the cage. Each fighter’s corner (a few representatives from their respective mixed martial arts gym that offers advice, hydration, and a stool to sit on in between rounds) will take their place at opposite ends of the cage. After a ring announcer introduces both fighters and their backgrounds, the fight will soon be underway. Many fight organizations, amateur and professional alike, will have championship and non-championship bouts.

Non-championship bouts are classified by three, 5 minute rounds with a rest period of 1 minute in between the first and second rounds. The winner will move up the rankings in their weight class, and the loser will fall out of sight from being able to contend for a championship “belt”. Championship bouts involve a champion in a given weight class putting their belt at risk against the number one contender in a five, 5 minute round fight with a rest period of 1 minute in between the first to the fourth rounds. In any fight, the referee won’t typically allow the fighters to start immediately fighting until the ring girl (holding a sign with the round number) leaves the octagon cage, a panel of 3 judges signals their readiness, and the ringside doctor is standing by. Typically, fighters who compete at the lower weight classes are more exciting to watch because they’re usually faster than heavyweights and still have knockout power.

When amateur and professional fighters are juxtaposed, amateur fights are usually much shorter than professional fights. Many fighters at the amateur level will throw caution to the wind and fight recklessly, which leaves them open for counters and/or submissions. Also, due inexperience, some amateur fighters may quickly realize that they’re in over their heads and “turtle” (it’s like assuming the fetal position) if they get hit once or twice. Contrast the amateur fighters with their professional counterparts, and the fight often takes a much different course. During a professional fight, the action during the beginning is largely used as a “feeling out” period. Spencer (2013) agrees with this statement: “Fighters learn (or not) to ‘feel out’ their opponents and strike their opponents at opportune times” (p. 239). Since the clashes usually occur in shorter and more intense spurts, don’t take your eye off of the action even for a second. A few more techniques are witnessed at the professional level.

One of these techniques are a “feint” (fake strike- punch, kick, elbow, or knee), which is thrown to elicit a reaction from their opponent. If the opponent is persuaded to react, they may leave themselves open for being counterpunched (getting hit immediately after personally throwing a strike) or taken down to the mat. Another technique that professional mixed martial artists are more likely to employ versus an amateur fighter is movement, which can also expose a fighter to a wide array of attacks. Specifically, when a fighter moves in angles, they can create more favorable exchanges because it is harder to predict than if a fighter is moving just forward and backward. Also, if two fighters are vis a vis and stationary, one may opt to quickly move laterally so the other fighter has to reset their feet (and get punched in the process). A fighter must be able to effectively utilize these and other techniques at any given moment because as Alm and Yu (2013) state: “MMA allows the use of both striking and grappling while in position of both standing and on the ground” (p. 12).

After a fight has concluded, the official decision is announced by the referee with at least the winner standing by the referee’s side. If a fighter “stopped” their opponent (finished him or her via referee stoppage or “tap out” (submission), or by the other corner throwing in the towel), the referee will announce that fighter outright as the winner. A common mantra among the mixed martial arts discourse community is to never leave the fight in the hands of the judges; just like in boxing, a 10 point must system is employed by a panel of 3 ringside judges if the fight happens to goes the distance. Although the judges attempt to remain impartial, their final decision is entirely subjective. The criteria in which a fight is judged is based on damage, knockdowns, ring control (maintaining a top position when wrestling, attempting a submission, staying near the center of the cage, or pinning their opponent against the cage), and aggressiveness. Like in other sports, a win is a win, and when a fighter breaks down into tears after having his hand raised, it just goes to show how hard they worked for that moment.

Mixed martial arts have received its fair share of bad publicity and prejudice for a variety of erroneous reasons. Fighting occurs in almost every mainstream sport within the United States- hockey, baseball, basketball, football, and more. It’s just the nature of our culture, boys during early and middle childhood engage in aggressive play that helps to establish dominance. I hope to have dispelled the belief that all fighters are “thugs”; many are well-educated, normal people with respected occupations that are merely seeking to test their mental and see how their style and skills stack up against others. Many mixed martial artists represent the sport with honor and uphold scruples to the nth degree- Randy Couture and Nathan Quarry are quintessential examples. I challenge you to delve into the sport of mixed martial arts and watch an event composed of stacked card. Armed with a new perspective, it is much less likely that you will “tap out”.

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